

Welcome to the Stress-Free Newsletter!



Stress
Over
Time

In this
issue:
How the
same
stress
reaction
that
saves
your life
can
shorten
it too

The Story of Stress Over Time

Last month we took an imaginary stroll into our prehistoric past and learned why the stress reaction is so important to our ability to stay alive in life-threatening situations. We now know that all stress is not harmful or inappropriate. Our automatic reactions to stress in acute situations (lasting minutes or hours) help keep us alive - even if they aren't very pleasant. It's when these stress reactions become chronic (lasting for days, months or even years) that we get into big-time health trouble.

Remember that in order to trigger a stress reaction in the body, our minds must first believe that we are in some sort of danger. But the danger doesn't have to be of the life-threatening variety. Prolonged exposure to unpleasant situations in which we feel powerless to change things will generate the same reactions in our bodies as sudden exposure to immediate danger (such as avoiding an oncoming car). These "low-grade" stress reactions may be less extreme in their effects than acute stress reactions, but all the same elements are in play. To review:

- The heart beats faster and with more force
- Blood pressure is elevated
- Breathing is faster and shallower
- The mind is extremely alert
- The digestive tract is partially shut down
- Stress hormones (adrenaline and cortisol) are at perpetually elevated levels in the bloodstream
- Levels of sugar and insulin are frequently above normal.
- The immune system becomes unbalanced in its reactions to both outside invaders and our own healthy body tissues.

The consequences to our health from living in a perpetual state of "emergency" can be devastating. A partial list includes:

- Hypertension
- Changes in heart size, shape and electrical rhythm.
- Hardening and narrowing of arteries and other blood vessels
- Strokes
- Heart attacks
- Obesity
- Diabetes
- Ulcers
- Auto-immune disorders
- Sleep disorders
- Mental and emotional difficulties - such as a reduced ability to cope with routine life events, an inability to focus on one task for any length of time, the onset of increasing anxiety and depression, and a loss of enjoyment of those things that used to give us pleasure in life.

The great irony is that the very body responses that have kept us alive in short-term situations for thousands of years are the same responses that contribute to early death if present all the time. So what's changed in our world that contributes to a sense of stress without an "off" switch and which generates these profound health consequences?

Many health professionals feel that the answer lies largely in the fact that our brains are bombarded with stimulation from our environment at a level we were never meant to maintain for long periods of time. In last month's story of the *Cave Man and the Bear*, our prehistoric ancestor had his safe, quiet cave to return to after his stress reaction helped him escape being eaten by the bear. There he could share his adventure with others like himself, eat a meal, warm himself by the fire and finally fall asleep to the chirp of crickets and frogs. His "emergency" chemistry lasted just as long as it was needed to save his life, and no longer.

Having plenty of free time with which to process the events of the day has been a dependable part of the human experience until the 20th century. Now, how many of us can claim to have *any* part of our day that isn't filled with unending stimulation? Even our "down-wind time" is filled with the presence of the TV, telephone or internet. Precious vacations are crammed with as much activity as we can squeeze into them (ever need a vacation from your vacation?). Surprisingly, there seems to be a real physical penalty to be paid for the loss of quiet moments from our lives. Very few of us would have guessed that the absence of regular time in which we do "nothing" could have such serious consequences for our health. We might think such time nice occasionally, but do we see it as essential to our health as we do proper nutrition and exercise? The great majority of us do not.

The first step in creating positive change in people's lives is to create the motivation for that change to take place. Have I sold you on the idea that finding a way to avoid living in a state of perpetual stress is more than just casually important to overall health and life expectancy? If you aren't willing to make the lifestyle changes for the health benefits alone, then make them simply because life is a far more pleasant experience without perpetual stress than with it. Even if you don't care about yourself, do it for all the loved-ones, friends and co-workers that have to interact with you as you move through your life. Seen in this light, not to take the best possible care of yourself is actually a form of selfishness!

In our next issue, we'll begin to have a closer look at how some of our most common reactions to living in a high-stress world mix with our body chemistry during times of stress to make things worse than ever. And we'll learn what we can do to make things better instead.

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A little bit about *us* can be found in the biographies below – BUT - what we are most interested in is learning a little bit about *you*. Please write or call and let us know about the things that you care about, the things you like and don't like, and what needs you have that we can help fill.

Timothy Dey, M.D. is a speaker and educator who makes a unique combination of educational assets and life experiences available to people through his coaching, consulting, writing, and workshops. He is a certified comprehensive coach, a graduate of the Wayne State University School of Medicine, a workshop and teleclass leader, an adjunct professor of pharmacology, and creates and conducts health-related courses that address fundamental issues in society today. Dr. Dey is also a consultant to professionals seeking expert guidance in helping clients who are experiencing significant stress in their lives. As co-founder of The Dey Group, Inc., he is devoted to providing resources and support for those in the business and professional communities.

Sharron McDougall-Dey is a creator and organizer of uniquely designed workshops for health-care professionals, women in transition and many types of small businesses. She has two years experience as project manager for a national telecommunications corporation and has been instrumental in the creation and management of a number of dental and veterinary practices throughout her career. She has developed strong listening and observational skills, and uses them to bring to awareness those elements in the office environment that are contributing to a successful practice, and those which are acting as roadblocks. Her organizational skills combined with sensitivity to individual strengths of staff help her to forge teams that excel in reaching common goals within a rewarding workplace. An Associates degree in Business adds to her abilities to co-create success for the companies with whom she works. She is affiliated with Thomas Leonard's CoachVille, Inscape Publishing, Inc., and is also co-founder of The Dey Group, Inc. (Michigan)